



The Bat Series

MADAME MARGOT

A ROMANCE OF
OLD CHARLESTON

BY

JOHN BENNETT



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MADAME MARGOT

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*A Grotesque Legend
of Old Charleston*

BY
JOHN BENNETT



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TO

. . . You, and you, and you,
. . . who have gone greatly here
In friendship, making some delight, some true
Song in the dark, some story against fear.

. . . Lovers yet shall tell the nightingale
Sometimes a song that we of old time made,
And gossips gathered at the twilight ale
Shall say, "Those two were friends," or "Unafraid
Of bitter thoughts were those because they loved
Better than most."

. . . There in the midst of all those words shall be
Our names, our ghosts, our immortality.

—JOHN DRINKWATER.

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In an age so glorious, so rich and fine, and so be-starred with splendor that one almost forgets the bottomless abyss into which it plunged at last, there lived a woman in Charleston of whom a very odd story is told.

The languid, lovely, tired old town was then a city brave and gay, with Mediterranean manners and Caribbean ways.

The perfume of ten thousand flowers drifted upon the winds, which came and went over a thousand gardens, ebbing and flowing like the tide.

Clouds of snowy gold and roses rolled

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across the sky, like the vast rotundas of a city builded of colored ivory. Slowly rising overhead, in windy and ethereal masses, they stood, carvings of pale porphyry upon a turquoise wall. The earth was transfigured with beauty.

It was a golden age, when all things were fair; nothing had grown old; even the tragic and the terrible were comely then. Wonder lay on everything. Merely to exist was to be happy. It was a world of unextinguished youth; life was brimful to the lips with delight.

In the gardens rare flowers bloomed, and rare fruits ripened,—pomegranates, oranges, medlars, figs, jujubes, and the purple Indian peach; and among the flowers, like winged flames, small and bright, sped the harlequins, the painted nonpareils, delicately beating the soft wind with their pied wings; while in

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the pomegranate-tree, among the dull bronze fruit, the mocking-bird sang his love and rapture. Through the green-hedged close, women, beautiful and stately, paced the shade, with men beside them, slender and straight, passionate and haughty, with fierce, bright eyes as ardent as the goshawk's and as bold; and lovely girls, with dark hair and skins of alabaster, as graceful and as timid as fawns, and with fawn's eyes, slipped among the green leaves like flowers alive.

Those were charmed days indeed. The town has changed since then. The world seems to have grown weary and gray, and the hearts of men bitter. The young were younger then; the old not so sorry for everything as they have been since. Then, somehow, it seemed to be always summer morning, morn-

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ing before the sun had burned the world to a dun crisp with his meridian heat, scorching bitter and blinding bright; before the advent of gasping afternoon with its languid leafage and evaporated sap. The calendar seemed to have paused among the daffodils, between the jessamine and the June, in that paradise of the year. The delicate and virginal camellia bloomed then, untarnished by rough wind or rain; its petals were sweet, which since then have grown so bitter. The elm-trees did not then bloom thrice for one green coat. And no one ever paused to think that no good and lovely thing exists on earth without its corresponding shadow.

The world was full of the sound of sweet, flute-like voices of young women calling after their lovers; and the singing of small birds made slender, pleas-

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ant melodies among the cool myrtles. Life was simpler; perhaps more child-like though more passionate. Two who loved each other might walk together, hand in hand, along the path, singing their happiness, without reproach, save, perchance, from some lugubrious, gray-bearded presbyter mourning, among mossy tombstones, life's evanescence.

And happy youth was without a fault, unless it were a trivial one, some *péché mignon*, a guileless, guiltless, girl-ish sin, like kissing oneself in the looking-glass for lack of another lover.

In all the town there were none so pretty, none so graceful or so sweet, as the golden girls of San Domingo. They flowed along the windy streets, their turbans nodding, like a stream of tulips. They fluttered down the byways in their white muslin dresses like bebies

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of butterflies. The loveliness of their slender bodies and the beauty of their youthful faces were far beyond all dull description; they were a bed of tiger-lilies in the sun. The earth loved the tread of their flying feet, which seemed to be forever dancing pastourelles; and the narrow lanes of the city laughed with the lilt of their Creole tongue.

Among the golden San Domingans the loveliest of all admittedly was Marguerite Lagoux, the milliner, by her patronage called Rita, by her familiars Margoton, by envious rivalry Madame Margot; and, after all was over and done, known merely as Old Mother Gogo.

Hers was glorious physical loveliness in its fullest maturity. It was in an

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hour of inspiration the indolent god of beauty drew the lines on which her body was built.

Her passionate, rich-colored, handsome face was like a line from an old enchantment which took men's souls captive, then cast them away without the least regret, or with a Circean spell turned them into beasts. Her neck was a deep-colored, ivory tower poised perfectly over her breast. The dazzling, orange-tawny skin of her broad bust turned to golden-russet before it reached her cheeks, and was there flushed to dusky rose, like the skin of a ruddy-gold peach. In the burnt splendor of her cheek the darkly eloquent blood in her veins made its golden proclamation. Her mouth was long and strangely curved like a retroverted bow; the lips of a queer fruit-color, not

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crimson, carmine, nor magenta, but a little of all three. The upper lip was brief to a fault, and curled back on itself like a rich-pulped fruit which has parted in ripening. The full under-lip cast a heavier shade than the lips the old masters chose, when they painted a picture of the Madonna. Her hair, like a dark, uncertain cloud, fell down in heavy coils, gathered and knotted at the nape of the neck, bound there in a golden net; or lay in an unfilleted band across the broad, low brow, drawn back into braids over her ears, or collected into a turban tied with peculiar dexterity. Her body was cast in a glorious mould: she was tall; in figure perfect, and full of a stately, tiger-like grace, the envy of other women. She moved, when she walked, as an empress might if heaven but gave her grace, with

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an exquisite, perfect motion, devoid of every appearance of effort,—not striding, but seeming to glide like a swan swimming on untroubled water. In the sluggish grace of her heavy lips and deep-lidded, brooding eyes, she was as full of an indolent, sleepy beauty as midsummer afternoon. Dressed in bright merino, crimson, orange, and blue, with a kerchief of blood-colored silk around her head bound in oriental fashion, beads of amber around her neck, and in each ear a hoop of gold, she looked like a great golden lily dusted with *sang-dieu*.

One day she was the lily; the next a yellow rose; and the next she was a tulip,—gold, crimson, purple and black. She was a Caribbean summer incarnate, of flower-blooms, thunder and gold. The passing traveler, seeing her, stopped

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while he caught his breath. There was something about her commanded attention besides her remarkable beauty. One spoke of Ducie Poincignon casually; but one spoke of Rita Lagoux with an accent.

Of all the milliners of her day Margot was first beyond compare. Her taste was perfect; her instinct for color was never at fault; her choice of fabrics exquisite. None equaled her in dexterity; she was like a marvelous spider weaving webs of gossamer. Those who sought beauty found it; her patrons were patrician; all of the very best employed her art; she had no successful competitor; beside her Eloise Couesnon was esteemed but *maladroit*.

Margot's shop was in King street,

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near Mignot's Garden, a little above the Bend. She lived in a little alley known as Lilac lane, a narrow, crooked, private path between two large estates, which rambled into the interspace like a brown brook into a wood. Beneath high green hedges it wandered into the solitude, growing narrower as it went, until the hedge boughs, meeting, knit themselves together, interlacing their elastic, leafy twigs. There the baffled foot-path seemed to lose its way and to abandon every purpose for which foot-paths are designed, ran on a little, hesitated, crept on again uncertainly, then gave up hope and disappeared in a green perplexity. The unfamiliar traveler paused here, bewildered, and turned back to find a bolder thoroughfare; familiar feet alone pressed on through Lilac lane.

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Where the strait way vanished into the wilderness stood Margot's cottage, tucked snug as a plum stone in a plum. Around it was a garden hedged by box and bay. Of all the hedges in Lilac lane the highest were Margot's. They rose around her garden in an impenetrable thicket, tall, dark-tangled, dense and old, their green tops tossing against the blue beyond the reach of the hedger's bill. Within lay a little tranquil space, withdrawn alike from curious gaze and the town's brawl, and overshadowed by the wide boughs of two great magnolias, whose drowsy shade fell heavily on the sleepy oleanders and over the rows of tulips below, that lifted up their golden cups and filled the air with odor. Here day and night flowed by in undisturbed serenity; all noise was hushed and tumult quelled; the shyest

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wild birds nested here in perfect confidence, fear cast away and foes forgot. No place in all the town seemed more secure from rude intrusion. No apparition came by night, no terror by day; so quiet it was, so full of peace, it seemed a sanctuary withdrawn from the interrupting clash and rude alarms of the troubled world,—its tranquillity that of a convent close, with little, distant, ringing bells, recurrent chimes and subdued voices, muffled by distance, as of nuns chanting an office in the peaceful choir of a green-nooked nunnery.

Margot Lagoux had a daughter; her name was Gabrielle.

Though Margot was lovely, Gabrielle was lovelier. They differed in beauty as pompadour-pink differs from brier-

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rose. Margot's was a golden beauty; Gabrielle's an ivory loveliness. Margot was a pottery figurine moulded with marvelous skill; Gabrielle a statuette of exquisite porcelain. Margot was like the summer sun, dazzling, opulent, sumptuous; Gabrielle like the young spring moon in her slender loveliness; the lines of her flowed one into the other like the lines of a song. Her hands were delicate and fine, their touch as light as flowers blown by the wind, which drift like a whisper across the face of the passer-by. Her feet were arched like a Spanish girl's; her ankles were the loveliest things that ever sandal-ribbon bound; she walked like the wind of an April morning through meadows after rain.

Her face, with its delicate high cheekbones, was like the fair flower of Nor-

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mandy; but her beauty was not Western, 'twas Eastern; it was like the pale Persian roses which blow by the gray-marbled waterways among the fallen pillars of the forgotten gardens of Istakhr,—roses of yesterday, full of yesterday's unbearable loveliness, yesterday's happiness, yesterday's tragedy, —fragrant with passionate, heart-breaking perfume, piercingly sweet, with the pathos of swift-passing beauty, far keener than that of ruins and age. She was of a loveliness such as sometimes comes out of India unburned by the Indian sun, of which dreamers make dreams of unforgettable beauty.

Her slender young body was like a piece of perfect ivory laid away to be carved. Her long, dark, tangled eyelashes fell upon her cheeks like sudden gusts of darkening rain; her cheeks were

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japonica-color; her lips pale pomegranate-red; her hair ebony; her temples were traced with crocus-blue.

Her cheeks japonica-color? They were the hue of peach flowers at dusk: God who gave them knew whence came both peach flower color and dusk.

At every breath there came and went beneath her transparent skin a shadowy crimson under-dusk, ebbing and flowing with the beat of her heart like a somber, twilit tide,—San Domingo's *sang de crépuscule*; and through her fingers the sunlight shone with a golden radiance like the glow of a rose through a glass of madeira.

She might have been sister to Scheherazade in her exquisite, aquiline, high-born loveliness, a patrician beauty strangely like that of old French romance. Far and away beyond compare

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she was the loveliest girl in St. Finbar's parish; and the faces of the young girls in St. Finbar's made that ancient, dim, gray parish bloom like the gardens of Paradise.

God, who knows everything, knows whence she had her exquisite, slender body, her aristocratic face, the dusky crimson tide, the touch of fantasy which made her lovely as a strain of wild, passionate music played on the deep strings of a gipsy violin.

For, as the rarest beauty remains imperfect without a touch of strangeness, without something to haunt and to fret the mind, forbidding it to forget, there was a something almost, if not quite, fantastic, in Gabrielle's loveliness—a touch of irregularity difficult to define—making her beauty more significant through being peculiar, more poignant

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through being strange. Something indefinite and conjectural tinged her being; the ghost of a vaguely intricate and tragical implication beneath her bright young innocence lurked shadowy and malign. Had her beauty been less perfect this, perhaps, had been less notable. Revealed in a casual attitude, for a moment startling in vividness, now for a moment it was lost, and now stole forth again in the stress of unstudied emotion to accent a passing mood.

As one who, looking into her mirror, sees a face there not her own, Margot perceived in her daughter's face an intricately blended likeness, to banish which into forgetfulness she strove desperately in vain,—the recollection of a wild, sweet, irrevocable hour whose memory was fear. Gabrielle's beauty made her tremble.

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It is a perilous privilege for a girl to possess loveliness rising above her station in life; there is a price always to be paid for it, sorrow the common fee; such a heritage of beauty often proves but a legacy of shame,—a beauty built for destruction, a loveliness for scorn; haggard wisdom reaps in tears what innocence sowed with laughter.

There was a thought from which Margot shrank as from a draught of poison: Gabrielle degraded and desolate. There was nothing to her more precious than her daughter's innocence; nothing so important as her earthly happiness; these seemed to Margot even more necessary than her eternal peace.

Yet ever a shadow hung over her child, from cradle to grave; her delicate grace and refinement were signatures of dread. Margot's eyes hunted from

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side to side as do a deer's hard pressed by the dogs—can one elude destiny?

Where were the lovely and the fair she had known in her own youth? Dead, long ago; the graveyard sand lay cold upon their lips; their passion and their sweetness were forgotten long ago. Margot knew that youth and summer night are made for ecstasy. She knew, too, that in forgotten graveyards are many unmarked graves of hapless beauty. Looking into the mirror where life is stripped of its illusions, and truth stands stark and bare in its unmitigated ugliness, panic terror seized Margot.

Was there no refuge, no escape, nor safety anywhere; no retreat, nor harbor, but in hopeless longing; always the far-off lightning and threatening of storm? Peering into the future she was filled with apprehension. In

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dreams she saw Gabrielle's innocence hanging over a black abyss; in dreams saw a fawn torn by ravening wolves. She awoke, starting up, crying out! There was nothing but the night. Yet she arose from her bed, and, crouched by her crucifix, prayed for her daughter as she never had prayed for herself.

At adolescence Gabrielle was a vision of delight. In temperament she was ardent as is a summer shower, which gives, when it gives, all that it has to give, in a rush of wind and rain. Unspoiled by knowledge, unruined by folly, too innocent to be perplexed by life's anxieties, her soul mistook Earth for the pathway to Paradise, and nothing as yet had discovered her error.

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With her each hour began afresh the tale of life, a long, sweet, glad surprise.

Rose-winged days and golden nights were come to Gabrielle, whose feet stood at the smiling gate of the Primrose Way. But Margot's days and nights were filled with passionate anxiety, as with increasing doubts and fears she confronted destiny.

The inner house-door gave upon a little paved court, where two twisted old fig-trees grew, many-branched candelabra, tipped in spring with green-leaved lights. Green-leaved shadows wavered below on a duck-pool's marble bowl, stained green from the copper tenons which tied its stones together. Here ducks praised Jove with yellow bills, and splashed viridian wings. In the pool, glimmering, one saw the stuccoed cottage-wall, on the irregular sur-

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face of which old colors showed in broken chequers through the new until the wall was patched with unpremeditated beauty. Across the pool the silvery sunlight glimmered like a streak of flame. But the fairest thing reflected there was Gabrielle, dancing on the old stones which paved the court,—dances fantastic as her mood; sarabands to the stately rhythm of odd old songs, deliberately slow; canzons whose pathos was lost in a pirouette; minuets which mimicked the swallows overhead with their swift glissades among the trees and undulating sweeps among the flowers,—snatching the poppies as she passed, and thrusting them in her hair, and pausing at last like a wind-blown flower above her reflection in the pool,—Gabrielle, singing old songs by the world forgotten,—strains of wild beauty, that by

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wayward loveliness have a peculiar power to please, with old melodies, alluring and sweet; songs such as long ago stole the souls of saints determined upon salvation, and gave themes for many troubadour lays, of which, though all are lovely, the greater part are sad, being memories of loveliness departed into the dust: one of life's paradoxes, that the memory of beauty should be bitter.

Here, remote from the curious world, preserved by the cloistral hedges from prying indiscretion, flowed her secluded existence. Few ever saw her. Such as by chance observed her through some green interstice, dazzled by her beauty, hurried off to spread the tale of an enchanted princess in an enchanted wood; hedge-balked and bewildered, few had ever seen her twice; by which she had

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been the more thought of through being the less seen.

Many had sought the courtyard; but none had found the way. Margot kept it a solitude lest Gabrielle suffer corruption, and around her maintained a veritable nunnery of care, hovered over her, and kept her as close withdrawn as a novice in a convent-garth.

But beauty cannot be sequestered always safely anywhere. Cloistral life is very well for souls of cloistral nature and of the convent sort; but youth and spring hate convents, and will have life's novitiate, or none. There is a crevice in every hedge, no matter how tall or how thick it may be, and through it, ever, Gabrielle peeps.

Spring followed winter; May's warm

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slow, yellow, moonlit nights were come.

Then Gabrielle grew tired and white. Her hand became tremulous; her light foot stumbled; she left off dancing in the garden. She sighed wistfully; her song ceased; her mouth showed scarcely a smile's wasted ghost. Her eyes, like those of a wounded creature, followed everywhere; her tears flowed at nothing. She grew as languid as a withering flower. The light of her seemed going out. The pallor of her face and the feverish luster of her eyes startled and frightened Margot.

Days dragged a laggard length; night still more oppressed her. She lay awake, whispering with dry lips she knew not what; calling she knew not whom; her trembling hands pressed against her breast. Fancies for which she found no name, thoughts for which

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she had no words, and visions inexpressible, would not let her sleep. Night after night she lay awake, consuming the hours with wonder; or, if she slept, awoke in tears, fell asleep to tears again, and waking, tear-wet, trembling, with darkened lids and drawn face, grew daily worse.

Vague, moody wants annoyed her; the night was harassed by melancholy dreams; the day vexed with formless fancies.

Walking alone in the garden, answerless questionings beset and frightened her; she listened where there was nothing to be heard; stared where there was nothing to be seen; found peace nowhere.

Her heart ached with unreasoning pain; she grew as gusty as a storm; the speechless, inexplicable wonder within

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her breast throbbed like a festered thorn.

Margot too well knew the cause: there was but one alleviation.

Spring, with its universal song, from grove and garden lifted up its deathless melody of bloomy verdure and warm-breathed sweetness. All living creatures voiced the universal theme: "Rejoice with the partner of thine heart in the happy days of thy youth!"

The blue dove moaned out his heart's desire; the copper beetle wooed and won his lady in the dust; butterflies and dragon-flies glittered in the wind, happy in their airy ecstasy—they fluttered among the hedges; they sported among the flowers—and all the earth rejoiced in having its heart's desire. Thrush and

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mockers sang, "Passion, passion . . . heart-breaking passion!" to their pretty feathered paramours. From every spray the vireo cried shrill, in shreds of melody, "Heart's desire! Heart's desire!" In the fragrant green-bay the painted bunting's love-call rang incessantly; while from the tufted grove arose the stirring chant of earth's universal choir, the canticle, all passionate and shrill, of "Love, love, love!" and yet again of "Love!"

How can one keep it from the heart of youth, that, all unknowing, yet numb with longing, breathlessly awaits its coming, and trembles like a leaf with the wordless yearning of unrecognized desire.

Gabrielle was intoxicated with the passion of her own heart, without an object or an aim; her throat was almost

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choked with youth's sweet, innocent desire; and, ever, within her shaking heart, the questioning wonder grew.

"Mother," she said wistfully, "what is it fills the world with music day and night? What is it makes the whole world sing?"

"Happiness," replied Margot, "and joy of the spring."

"Happiness?" rejoined Gabrielle. "If it be happiness, why does it make my heart ache? Why does spring hurt me so?"

Margot, startled, sat staring, wrung with sudden fear.

"And what is this love of which every one sings—we women most of all?"

"The source of all wretchedness. Leave it alone!" cried Margot. She looked at her daughter in terror.

"But," replied Gabrielle, wondering,

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“if love be the source of all wretchedness, why is its song so sweet?”

“Because fools have their folly!” cried Margot. “Love-songs are sweet to a lover, as folly is dear to a fool. Worship thy God,” she said harshly, “and leave foolishness to the fool!”

“Love—foolishness?” said Gabrielle, puzzled. “You told me that God is love!” She turned the riddle over and over in her mind.

“What ails you?” asked Margot.

“Nothing,” said Gabrielle. But a flush stole up her cheeks. “How does a woman know, Mother, that she loves, so that she may say certainly, ‘This is love’?”

“By the utter despair that tears her heart in two.”

“But, Mother,” protested Gabrielle, “they tell me that love is sweet!”

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"Sweet? As wormwood!" said Margot hoarsely. "It is nothing but fever and fret."

"Many I see who have it; but none who fret. Might I not know for myself a little of this pretty play of lovers and beloved?" besought Gabrielle.

Margot looked at Gabrielle and trembled, seeing the shadow upon her, foreseeing the fate of her loveliness, perceiving indiscretion's lips at the rim of the cup of terror. "What man has snared your silly heart?" she asked.

Gabrielle stared at her. "Why should any man snare my heart?" she asked in pitiful wonder. "I have never harmed any man, nor any living thing." She caught her breath. "Oh, Mother, feel my heart beating! It beats as if it would burst. Why does my heart beat so? Am I dying? Do you think that

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I must die? Yet, Mother, my heart is aching so that I would that I could die! Is not what God made good . . . you told me that God was love . . . was not mankind made by God . . . and is not love the world's delight?"

"It is its direst misery," said Margot bitterly. "God keep you from it. Two parts are pain, two sorrow, and the other two parts are death."

"I don't fear death," said Gabrielle. "Then why should I fear love?"

"Because it is a lie," cried Margot, beside herself. "I conjure you, by God's sorrow, close your ears against it."

"How can I close my ears against it when I hear it in my sleep?"

Margot's delight in her daughter's beauty was turned into bitterness. "Peace!" she cried. "And leave me.

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All this will pass away." But, deep within, her heart said, "Never!" Innocence will be indiscreet. Sin alone is always clever. And in youth great things are lightly asked and lightly given. "Go!" she cried to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle left the room. Margot buried her face in her hands.

It is hard for woman to stand alone and to resist temptation forever. Soon or late the black moment comes; reason is off guard; prudence abandons her; caution is thrown to the winds: passion betrays. Here is an irremediable disease which baffles the skill of the physicians. Margot recoiled as she faced the future. Time had become a terror. Burning tears flowed down her cheeks. There is no woe so sickening as the monotone of fear, the shuddering, interior sense of impending catastrophe.

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Nor is it eased by the strange apathy which is granted to the doomed. Margot groaned in an agony, half remorse, half apprehension. Could God set so foul a seal upon so fair a thing?

Again on a day Gabrielle came in from the garden, her eyes dry-burning and famine-bright. "Mother, give me a lover!" she cried. "Nietta Pascault has one!"

"Then alas and alack for Nietta Pascault!" cried Margot.

"But, Mother, he called her his heart's delight; she did not speak, but she kissed him; and he kissed her until he must have bruised her lips; yet she did not seem to care . . . rather she seemed to like it. And all he said was 'Love me! Love me!' and all she said was 'Yes,' and 'Yes!' And when he kissed her she grew pale; I thought that

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she was dead, . . . but he held her in his arms, Mother, and kissed her again and again, as though he would kiss her back to life. Will kisses bring one back from the dead? For, Mother, suddenly she opened her eyes as if she lived only for love; and then all he said was 'Love me!' and all she said was 'Yes!' "

Margot's heart fainted.

Day after day Gabrielle knelt in the garden and plead for her heart's desire. Night after night Margot crouched on her floor and prayed, in despair and agony, that it might not be given her. Heaven's custodian mingled their prayers in fatal entanglement; one was answered, and one was not: he is responsible.

Sunset lay on Margot's garden. The paths still shimmered with the day's

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heat, though the lax grass lifted in the shadows. Nameless perfumes wandered among the drowsily-bending flowers; the odor of warm boxwood rose from the hedge. The hedge stood black against the sky; in its glistening, fragrant deeps small birds moved swiftly to and fro in curious agitation.

Gabrielle, puzzling upon life's unanswered riddle, stood listening to sounds beyond the hedge. Everywhere was the patter of hurrying feet, and the whisper of wordless laughter, mockingly borne on the evening wind. The air was full of the golden vision of light-footed maidens with fluttering garments, flying through Lilac lane, pursued by ardent and breathless lovers, eagerly following where they fled. The sound of laughter floated back along the narrow way, and the little faint echo

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of flying feet. It was that time of the year when all maids are sweet as freshly gathered flowers, and all men are a little mad. Even the earth, drab clod, was astir with the ecstasy of approaching night.

Beneath the broad-boughed magnolia grew a pomegranate-tree whose branches shrouded the greater tree's bole. The scarlet pomegranate flowers hung over Gabrielle; the green leaves folded her in. Faint color came fitfully over her cheek; her eyes roamed restlessly through the garden, but found no solace there. As she stood thus, brooding on life's inexplicable theme, she was aware of a sudden shadow which fell on the grass beside her, and turned in voiceless terror.

There was a face in the green hedge, smiling, two butterflies hovering over

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it,—a lad's face, laughing and debonair, with yellow hair curling around it like crisp little golden flames; his cheeks were as ruddy and smooth as a child's; his eyes were blue as the morning, swift and bright; the leaves stirred all around him as if to the beat of wings; there was confidence in his bearing, easy lordship and high pride.

Gabrielle, startled and terrified, shrank back against the magnolia's black bole, one trembling, hesitant hand extended in doubt. Speechless she stared at that bright, boyish face with its nimbus of sunlit, yellow hair, until her dry eyes gushed tears, dimming her sight,—stared in wonder and adoration.

His eyes were audaciously bright as wild stars, incessantly roving, and alight with golden fire. He was tall, well-set and slender, with a beautiful,

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straight body; there was something godlike in his air as he leaned through the matted hedge, eagerly scanning her,—her pale rose cheeks, snowy gown, moth-green kerchief, her lips, her neck matching the ivory of the blossoms in her hair,—half-veiled by a screen of leafy green, dull gold and pomegranate flowers.

She had bound her hair with a bit of gold braid which shone like an aureole round her brow, and in it had thrust two butterfly lilies, whiter than ivory; her eyes were wide open, round and unwinking, their frightened depths full of tears; her lips had fallen slightly apart to free her fluttering breath; she sighed, a little, shuddering sigh, and crossed her hands upon her breast. Her beauty startled him: delicate-frail, almost translucent in the golden sun, she

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seemed a being not of flesh and gross mortality, but a spirit by enchantment made visible, a dryad out of the ancient wood, a maiden saint stepped out of a missal or fled from a chapel window, with a halo around her brow. With her head poised like a flower; her little, perfect hands and feet; her ankles slim and beautiful; each line aristocratic; everything proclaiming patrician blood; nothing asserting a baser thing: saint, maid, dryad, nymph, or sprite, who could tell which?

Silently drinking her loveliness he leaned through the hedge. Among the fire-colored flowers and green, her color was exquisite as the violet sky is, seen through yellow leaves.

Again she sighed softly; stared at his face, and shivered a little. Was it a god or a man in the hedge? Had he

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sprouted out of the boxwood, or fallen from the clouds?

The perfect beauty of her figure, outlined on green by her thin white gown, charmed and enchanted him. He stared at her, trying to focus her face more clearly upon his sight; her loveliness struck him dumb. She seemed a statue of ivory, hung with garlands of gold, crimson and green, half-hidden by a rood-screen of shimmering emerald. It seemed to him that he looked on more than mortal beauty.

Leaning forward a little, one hand outstretched, one clasping her throat, she watched his face with its golden hair aglow in the last red sunlight. How could she tell if it were a god or a man,—that face with its shimmering locks like living fire around it, a gleaming nimbus whose dancing flames were fash-

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ioned of burnished gold, a face like a blazing seraph's, or Ariel's? She looked at that proud young countenance in wordless adoration.

Her own face was now intensely bright with the sunset's declining glory. Into the crevice between her lips the sunshine had slipped; her lips were translucent; her mouth was aglow as if she breathed ethereal fire.

Suddenly he drew his breath with a sharply audible sound; for, as he gazed, longing seized the boy's heart and wrung it bitterly.

The flame which blazed in his bright eyes put an answering glow in her own. She was aware that her beauty had startled him. For the first time in her life she was awake to her own loveliness, a sense wonderful and sweet. A delicate, throbbing fire came fluttering

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up through her breast; a flush stole into her cheeks and warmed their ashy pallor. Her eyes met his: in his eyes were joy, surprise, and longing. His eyes met hers: and all her doubts went out in wordless joy. For, when she perceived that look in his face, she, too, was thrilled with longing; the silence sang; fire thrilled her heart; suddenly neck and cheeks flamed red.

She answered his look with glorious eyes, humid, terrified, alight. Then her frightened eyes fell and her shy face. But, like a wave which breaks along a beach in a passionate surge, her heart rushed out to greet him.

He saw her neck and her cheeks flame red; passion struck him to the heart. With a gesture of haughty but boyish humility he pushed through the hedge, seized the sheltering pomegranate

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branches, and swept them aside. She stood uncurtained before him. He gazed at her. "St. Jacques!" he cried. "Are you a living creature?"

She regarded him for an instant with a look of undisguised terror, catching her breath with a sobbing sound right pitiful to hear; then her quivering, piteous face was made exquisite by tears.

A back-wash of timidity held him silently staring at her,—a boy, hot and hasty, sure of himself, impulsively bold, but abashed,—admiration and longing ablaze in his eyes. Gabrielle stammered, but could not find words; her breast heaved and sank; she could not control it. Overwhelmed by the sudden strange rush of emotion, she swayed giddily, dizzily put out one hand to steady herself, and laid it upon his

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arm: a tremulous smile came over her face; her tears, like an April shower, were gone.

His hand sought her other hand; found it; held it; thus their hands met. Half a step timidly they approached each other; than stood at a halt as if turned to stone. Her frightened breath was the only sound save the stirring of the night-wind in the dark boughs overhead.

Shaking like a wind-blown leaf, "*Que désirez-vous de moi?*" she gasped.

His voice, too, was trembling. "That you should love me a little, for pity's sake, . . . and quite forget to fear!"

His voice seemed to Gabrielle god-like.

"See, then . . . I fear nothing . . . I should as soon think of fearing the air we breathe!" she said, adoring her slen-

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der young demigod out of the hedge. Then suddenly she raised her hand and laid it caressingly on his cheek; her trembling fingers felt like flowers trailed across his face.

He laughed. There was an infectious sweetness and merriment in his laughter. Then they laughed together, softly,—first love and joy are silent things.

“You are the god of love,” she said, with infinite simplicity. “Else, how could you fly over the hedge?”

Her flute-like voice was like the music of a half-awakened song, and exquisitely moving; her words trailed slowly like speech asleep.

Again he laughed. “The god of love? *Bien!* Then what shall I have that is godlike?”

“What you will,” she said. “You

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may ask." For the innocent are trustful as doves, helpless as the least creatures, weak as the small birds among the little branches.

He drew a quick breath. "Most of all things on earth I would have a kiss from your mouth. Shall I have it?"

"Yes," she said. "Take it!" and put up her lips. So their mouths met. A thousand tingling darts of fire pierced through her as his lips touched hers.

Her heart was wrung by that first kiss; for an instant it stood still; the blood had left it, and had fled through her like flame; she almost swooned. For first passion is like the wind in the blossoming locust-tree, too sweet to be easily breathed or borne; youth's first caress is almost an agony. Gabrielle gasped; his lips had burned on hers like a celestial fire. Both shook as love's

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consuming flame rushed through them.

As he to her was first, so she to him; each gave the other life's immaculate gift, the unmeasured, unmeasurable fire of love's first embrace, that passionate anguish of delicate, uncalculated delight, ardent and boundless.

Their lips hurried to the meeting. How could they delay? Youth and love brook no delays. Yet, as she felt his lips upon her own, she regarded him with a writhen countenance of unqualified terror. Love comes to the maiden spirit with sudden tumult, and strikes it, not as a blithe discovery, or an all-Elysian joy, but as a birth and an agony, from which, if the soul survives, comes unspeakable happiness. His lips sought hers and seeking, met; in the meeting her soul flew out at her mouth.

The world seemed suddenly remote,

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withdrawn into the depths of uncalculated space. There remained but these two young, love-stunned souls, groping to each other in the garden under the shadow of the great magnolia-trees.

The enchantment of love was upon them. The happy girl lay close upon his heart, and all she said was, "Love me! Love me!" and, "If ever I cease to love you perdition take my soul!" he said. With utter confidence her eyes looked up into his, glowing with a passion that knows no change; and all she said, as she lay against his heart, was, "Love me! Only love me!" That is all a woman asks. Her fingers stroked his yellow hair; the mere touch thrilled her with unspeakable happiness.

Night came, and darkness voyaged the uncharted sky. Overhead the blue dome blazed with the innumerable stars

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and golden planets heaving up heaven's arch; the tremulous green lamps of the fireflies filled the earth with twinkling constellations all around them. But the heavens and the earth were as nothing to them: love was there, and he, and she, and the utterly forgotten starlight. And where youth and love are, life, death, good or ill, the bright stars or the black mould, or better or worse, are nothing, and wisdom is of little worth.

They gazed into each other's eyes with wordless tenderness. Youth has not words, nor waits to find them; age finds words, and nothing else.

Across the city boomed the hour,—
at last.

“Oh! I must go!”

“Not yet! Not yet!”

“But I must go. Good-night!”

“Not yet!”

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“But I must go! Good-night! Good-night! I pray you, leave me go . . . for truly I must go!”

“You ’ll come again?”

“To-morrow.”

“Show me the way into the garden,” he said. She showed him the quickest way in, kissed him, and was gone through the garden; for him the night was darkened, and the stars put out. Her breath was still upon his face, the smell of the flowers in his nostrils; and in his ears was the sound of her voice, calling after him, low and sweet, like a half-awakened song,—or was it but a bird which called, that softly-fluting, lonely note.

And when he was gone the garden to Gabrielle was emptied of delight; but all her soul was singing.

Her lips stung; her cheeks were on

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fire. Into the house she came, one little slipper upon its little foot, one slipper gone,—what became of that lost little slipper God knows!—and her stockinged foot was damp with the dew which had dripped from the leaves overhead. A flame was in her eyes which is in a maiden's eyes but once, when love first lays his hands upon her heart. So transfigured was she, she seemed a winged creature. She loved; she was beloved; inarticulate ecstasy! Hands, feet, neck, and face told but one story. Her eyes shone like blazing stars; the roses had returned to her pale lips, the freshness to her wan cheeks.

Margot watched her with narrowed eyes.

“Mother, I am happy; so happy that I do not want to die; I want to live forever!”

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Margot eyed her narrowly. "What has changed your mind?"

"I was walking in the garden," rejoined Gabrielle, "and the god of love was there. He kissed me on my mouth, Mother; and oh, Mother, love is sweet!"

Margot's heart stopped beating. "Are you quite mad?" she said.

Then the truth dawned upon her. She lost all sense of balance in the crossed tides of dismay. She strained her daughter to her heart, then thrust her away; dropped speech unuttered; gave a choked cry of despair, while her face went gray as ashes.

She clutched Gabrielle by the arms, steadying herself, for she could scarcely have stood alone. She blinked like a person purblind, and peered into the girl's wondering eyes. The lines of her face became furrows. "Oh, my God!"

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she whispered, "I should have known! I should have known!"

Margot cowered as if to avoid a blow; her eyes dilated; yet she seemed incapable of seeing; her mouth fell open, she seemed to scream, yet made no sound but that of the whistling breath through her nostrils, as one who sustains the torture of the rack.

She thrust Gabrielle from her. "Go!" she gasped, and struck herself on head and breast, crying out, "Mother of God! I should have known! Fool, fool, fool!" Then, as if stunned, her head fell down upon her breast.

In the dark and breathless stillness of the night there was a stern, strange loveliness; and now something akin to terror, the terror of a child that dreams,

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and, waking in the darkness, cries out from dread of unknown things.

An ill wind, which had been blowing since sunset with a far-off, moaning sound, had arisen to a melancholy, screaming note, with an extraordinary rumbling in the chimney. Clouds of soot and ashes, blown from the fireplace, whirled in drifts around the floor. The sound of distant thunder, the velocity of the wind, the increasing turmoil and confusion, filled the night with keen disease. A bird sped round the house with a shrill cry; the wind bellowed hoarsely in the chimney; the house shook with the blast; over the housetops could be heard the coming of the rain; the light of the flickering candles served only to increase the gloom; the draft from the window swelled out the print curtain and floated it half-way across

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the room, straining and whipping at its pole; the black magnolias bent, and rose, and bent again, as if beneath the beating of gigantic wings: it was close upon midnight.

Before her crucifix Margot knelt, regardless of the storm, praying in anguish for the safety of her child. Ever before her imagining was Gabrielle, dishonored and betrayed, abandoned to scorn and poverty. Her hands twisted in desperate appeal.

“Blessed St. Dominique, lover of souls, preserve my daughter!” she plead. She listened motionless; all that she heard was the roar of the wind.

“Mary, Mother, great in grace, defend and preserve my child! Mary, Mother of Sorrows, have mercy upon my daughter!”

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Again she listened; but for the howl of the gale the silence was profound.

“All ye Holy Virgins, intercede for us!” Her panting voice broke. “Lord of Compassion, hear me! Lord of Infinite Mercy, hear me! Have mercy upon my child! O Thou, Most Pitiful Lord of the Innocent, answer my prayer!”

Again she listened. There was no sound but the roar of the storm, the creak of the house, and the gnawing of the great rats in the timbers of the wall. She cringed and shivered, and in extreme entreaty cried, “Lord, Seigneur Dieu, preserve and spare my child! You see her young and fair, her soul as pure as the flowers that bloom in Paradise! You breathed into her life; by your law she was made; but for you she

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never had been; dare you then let her fall?"

But all was still. Heaven, to mortal anguish, seems intolerably serene, so far beyond comprehension is the inscrutable leisure of God. It was taking too long for her sorrow to reach the foot of the throne. She was seeking her daughter's safety, though it should be at the hazard of her soul; but all she had was the bitterness of unanswered supplication. To hearts dismayed there is nothing so appallingly still as God. The confident faithful may await the ultimate reply; but the desperate storm heaven, they have not time to wait.

She beat her breast; her hair was moist; her garments disarrayed; her voice grew sharp; by vicars, saints and intercessors, by all intermediaries, she plead with Almighty God to listen and

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to reply. There was no answer. "Mary, Mother of Sorrows!" she gasped. "Does God not understand?"

Her appeal arose piercing shrill: "*Dieu, Dieu, Eternel Dieu, écoute mes cris! Hâte-toi de ma secourir! Hâte-toi d'elle délivrer! O Toi, qui écoutes la prière, aie pitié de nous! Ne tarde-pas! Écoute, mes cris!*" She waited; there was no answer; and suddenly her voice went up like the cry of delirium:

"*O Dieu Très-haut, réveille-toi! Réveille-toi, mon Dieu!*" Then in a tone of amazement and pathos, "Mary, Mother of Sorrows," she said, "do I have to explain to God?"

She paused a moment while despair rose like a swelling flood; then through the darkness and the night went up a bitter cry: "*Seigneur Dieu! Tout-*

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puissant Dieu! sois attentif à ma prière: tu m'arroserez avec l'hysope, et je serai purifiée; vous me laveras, et je deviendrai plus blanche que la neige! Plus blanche que la neige, mon Dieu! Plus blanche que la neige! Gabrielle, ma fille, mon Dieu! plus blanche que la neige! Forgive in her my transgressions; pardon in her my sins; deliver her from her inheritance . . . O my God! . . . let her be white!"

A tremendous gust blew through the house; the wind sucked in the chimney with a sound like awful laughter; the blinds recoiled with thunderous shock; but from Heaven there was no answer.

At this she cried out pitifully as He who long ago cried out the cry, which through unending ages shall stand archetype of despair: "*Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné?*"

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The wind screamed round about her with the sound of many voices; far off arose a tumult as of many people running; borne on the wind came a torrent of hideous sound, not mad music, but awful dissonance, swiftly nearing, suddenly checked: after the clamor a silence like death; the room was fantastically still. Margot clung to the foot of the crucifix. "*Pourquoi, O Dieu, rejettes-tu?*" she asked in a voice grown shriveled and thin. She crouched a moment, motionless, her head on one side, listening. There was no reply. Heaven maintained its brassy silence. Her face went gray; her eyes were hard as stones; she turned her back on the crucifix, saying, "I will call upon You no more!"

There was a queer shuffling sound as of footsteps in the entry. The candles

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sank to dull blue sparks devoid of radiance; yet, instead of darkness there was light. Outside was darkness, vast, pit-mirk; inside, appalling light. All the place was stunned and blinded by an overwhelming light which cast no shadows anywhere, but, vehemently streaming, searched crack and cranny; not a crevice escaped. It lapped and flowed like waves, and penetrated everything; even the gross material of the walls, saturated by that flame, gave back a superfluous glow, a white excess of light, and every pointed thing within the room was peaked and capped with flame. Round and round the room a bewildered host of moths in little wavering flights and drops went fluttering, with a light rustle of powdery wings, and, among them, bats splashed through the light with a low, continu-

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ous whirr. Round and round, like froth-clots on flood-water swinging around a vortex, whirled slantbat and moth in a dizzy, irregular ring, in the midst of which, crouched in a high-backed chair, sat a shriveled, dead-alive, mummy-like figure, as thin and fleshless as a skeleton,—an apparition, sinister, white, and wasted as a corpse new-risen from the grave.

Its chin upon its folded hands, its hands about one knee, the knee upheld by the heel crooked at the chair-seat's edge, the other gaunt leg dangling across the upraised foot, the specter smiled on Margot a bleak, Saturnine smile. Its face was greatly wasted; all the life of it seemed gathered into the brilliant, terrible eyes, which blazed with infernal light, in splendid scorn, without remorse, sardonical; a coun-

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tenance such as God alone endures to look upon unmoved; a figure terrible . . . Deity, deformed, might look like this, grotesquely majestic, hideous, baleful, glorious, accursed, malign; an archangel, fallen, outcast, depraved: Satan, god of the discontent.

A twisted smile wreathing his evil lips, with his chin hooked over his hands, —a smile of cool confidence mingled with nonchalance, “Why not try me?” he said.

Staring into the abyss of blinding terror and light which encircled that thunder-scarred visage, with its thin, sleepless eyelids and twisted, ironic smile, Margot shrank against the wall, shivering as with cold; one hand shield-

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ing her blinded eyes, one groping along the wall, she listened, breathlessly.

In a voice whose deep and hollow sound seemed part of the midnight storm, Satan spoke.

“God has forgotten you; that is plain,” he said. “Then why not pray unto me? I remember when God forgets.

“What did ye hope? That He who left Jesus to die on the cross, would stoop to succor you? Nay, then; you have been cajoled. He has never so much as kept one man from the withering breath of time, but leaves a thousand ills on earth to work their wills upon him. Yet you thought He would harken to you? *Fi donc!* Neither for life nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor for all the powers that ever

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were, or shall forever be, will He alter for you, or for any, one iota of His law.

“Nay, though your heart break with its burden, not a jot of His law shall be altered to ease your load.

“I have seen all the piety under the sun; and its wages are vanity. What profit have you of all your labor; what recompense of your toil? Heaven hath sent you sorrow; it hath not sent a cure, nor had compassion upon you.

“If this be loving-kindness, why not try damnation awhile; not forfeit riches, power, and place, for a fool’s hope of treasures in heaven?

“Doubtless the priest hath said unto you, ‘What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’ Faw! I say unto you, ‘What profit hath a man, though he save his own soul, if he lose his heart’s desire?’

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“When you are dead and done for, and lie sleeping in the dust; when worms destroy your body, when your days upon earth are become as shadows, and you have no more a portion forever in anything under the sun, what shall it profit you to have saved your soul at the cost of your heart’s desire? Nay; ye have been cajoled! Your way is without hope.

“But come unto me, ye anxious, whose hearts are bowed with care, and I will give you your hearts’ desire! No man calls on me in vain; I turn none empty away; the world is full of my mercies upon those who trust in me; and my benefits fall like the summer rain on all who covenant with me. Ask, and ye shall receive, whatsoever your hearts may wish; yea, though it lie at the ends of the earth it shall be

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given unto you; your house shall be full of good things, riches, and place, and power; ye shall heap up gold like dust from the streets; ye shall have your hearts' desire!

"Come unto me, ye weary, whose hearts are bent with trouble; lay down your burden, and follow me; I will give you your heart's desire!"

Margot's hand went up the wall a little way toward the crucifix, then slipped back with fumbling fingers.

"Lord . . . Lord!" she whispered hoarsely, "give me my heart's desire!"

"And what is your heart's desire?"

"That my daughter, Gabrielle, should be white to all eternity! All that I have, and all that I am, will I give, . . . yea, for this would I give my soul."

Satan smiled.

"Then lay down your burden, my

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daughter; you shall have your heart's desire!"

Margot, with a sobbing cry, laid down her life's unbearable burden at the feet of the Prince of the Powers of Darkness.

By his eternal damnation he swore she should have her heart's desire; by her rejected salvation she swore to abide by the covenant.

"*Consummatum est!*" he said, and was gone on the black blast.

The candles sent up a thin flare of flame and smoke, and went out in utter darkness. Crouched on the floor against the wall Margot still knelt in a stupor. A rat came out of a hole in the wall and gnawed at her rosary. Dawn came in at the windows; the twilight gray grew pink. The walls were blotched and spotted; everything ex-

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haled an odor of mildew; Margot still huddled upon the floor beneath the crucifix; over her head the crucified Christ hung mute in His agony.

The flight of hours, the decline of day, the season's turn, all things which preface change are presages of parting, and, like the proximity of the tomb, though wreathed in bloomy myrtle, are subtly fraught with sadness and regret. All love's farewells are so oppressed. Though with absolute confidence in themselves and in each other, sure of the imperishable structure of their love, a nameless apprehension fills the hearts of all who part, and casts a melancholy shade on partings. "Until to-morrow!" Ah, to-morrow! "To-morrow I will come again!" she says. They go, with

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trembling hands, each, shaken by departure, saying, "Shall we meet again?"

"To-morrow!" Gabrielle had said, as she took her lips away. "To-morrow I will come again!" and was gone.

In the warm heart of the midsummer night he dreamed again among the hedges, a boy's dream, a dream of joy, a dream of heart's delight. Her lips were pomegranate blossoms; her cheeks were wild peach flowers; it was a boy's dream, a dream of joy, a dream of heart's delight! Her waist was as a willow-withe, her voice a bird in the deep wood calling; her feet danced fantasies in his heart. He came all in the daze of a boy's dream, a dream of joy, a dream of heart's desire. With every eager breath he drew in the hyacinthine fragrance of the night.

All day long, like a sullen army, a

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great cloud heaved and gloomed along the west, with wind-blown vapors streaming around its thunderous heights. All day long, in awe of it, men put off going here and there, gave over plans, and stood oppressed by its tremendous imminence. The day was darkened by the dominion of the cloud. At evening it rolled off across the plain, obliterating leagues of lesser storms, with fire stabbing at its breast, and distant bellowings of tremendous sound. Heaving slowly against the twilight stars, rolling in sullen majesty upon the gale, pale moonlight falling on its peaks, and the gray rain trailing down below, in its heart innumerable lightnings, thunder grumbling in its front, it left the drenched field to the moon. Beyond the edge of the world it hung,

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gloomily brooding upon the splendor of the night.

In the magic of the moonlight Lilac lane lay ghostly as a dream, hushed, alluring, unfamiliar. The strange, white light of the immense full moon lay dead on everything; the hedge-rows were hung with the shadows and darkness of strange delight; the cicada chattered in the almond tree; the great moths flapped heavily among the wet moon-flowers; a slow, scarcely perceptible wind blew, languid-sweet, hardly moving the heavy leaves of the magnolias; a gray bird pitched a wild song somewhere deep within a hedge.

In Margot's garden everything was wrapped in night's singular fantasy. In the pallor of the moonlight the garden lay like an enchanted realm of goblin loveliness. The lilies stood as pale and

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chill as flowers carved of marble; among the drowsy poppies hung garlands of nocturnal vine whose folded blooms in chaplets clustered colorless in the pallid moonshine. The whole place trembled in a pale, strange beauty which the silence made lovelier still. Like an island in a silvery mist Margot's house stood blind asleep, its little windows curtained deep with shadows, dim, blue, and dark, and on the woodwork of the door, like petals of dismantled flowers, wax-wet, wind-blown, walked moths thrown there by the whining wind, slowly blowing across leagues of lonely marsh; and, among the moths, the glow-worms, faintly lighted and phosphor-green, crawled up and down, up and down, to nowhere: it looked like the door of the way to oblivion, so lonely it seemed and so still. The garden was

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utterly empty; the house yard was deserted.

He looked; he listened; and his heart stood still; save for the glow-worm and the moth there was nothing alive there but him. Like the chill which creeps across the matted grass of evening in the last fair days of autumn, full of the faded fragrance and haunted dusk of fall, a wordless dread stole over him. The moonlight gleamed on the cottage wall with a singular, mournful splendor; a heavy wind began to stir the trees; immensely mournful, faint and far-away, there came a boom of thunder from beyond the rim of the world; joy all at once was gone from the midsummer night; the haunting strangeness crept into his heart. The place was full of the heavy fragrance of dead flowers. Here and there a palsied rose,

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its faded leaves relaxed, broke, and fell without a sound.

Under the fig-trees he paused a moment, undecided,—to listen, shivering a little, and peering along the wall. There was no sound of human life. Though the wind had set the great leaves stirring, all was ghostly as a dream. One white star above the roof-peak sailed among the broken clouds; the moon, desolate, splendid, hung in the magnolia, mournfully gleaming through the black boughs; in the still air the moonlight stood; the shadows lay like solid things upon the cottage wall.

At the corner of the house he paused and listened again. In the strange, unanswering silence a sense of disaster gripped him. There was no sound anywhere; his heart almost ceased beating.

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With premonition of catastrophe he ran along the wall:—nothing, but windows, battened or curtained, blank as a blindman's eyes; not a sign of humanity.

Where he had dreamed to stand speechless with happiness, he stood shaken by nameless fear.

Deep within the house he heard a relaxed beam “pung” with a sound like a viol string softly struck by a hand in passing: the deep, slow sound reverberated through the hollow house, and died away in vacant whispering.

Through the crevice of the shutter he saw the cold moonlight fall along the deserted floor. The house was absolutely empty.

There is a convent-school for orphaned girls kept by the nuns in New

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Orleans. The loveliest girl seen there in years was Gabrielle Lagoux, carried there between two nights, lest young love, like death, insist.

Dawn and departure. She had trembled like a leaf, half comprehending only; her mother kissed her twice, in feverish haste, with lips like dry leaves: that was their parting. Some one called "Gabrielle!" at the door. The coach was at the gate. She stopped at the wicket, looked down the lane, said a few words to the coachboy who guarded her gown from the wheels: "Tell him," she said, "that I love him. Tell him remember me." She paused again at the door of the coach, her foot on the step, a dazed look in her eyes, saying, "Tell him not to forget me. I love him!" The wheels rumbled over the cobbles. She never came back. When she en-

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tered the coach young love was done for forever: she never saw her golden lad again. Love beat his rose-red wings in vain; he could not overtake the coach; for the coach was fate; all was over; his dusty feet halted in the heat of the dusty road; "Good-by! . . . Good-by, forever!"

Days became weeks, weeks months, months grew into years; she never came again. She passed through the convent's sheltering door, was safe from mischance and folly; passed into a world remote of unfamiliar faces, and forgot.

God made memory cruel, that men might know remorse; but the Devil devised forgetfulness, anodyne of regret.

Reputed heiress to vast estates, provided with boundless means and gifted with great beauty, coming to marriage-

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able age in all the freshness of her youthful loveliness, she was wedded to a wealthy planter's only son whose love for her was very great.

Pure happiness was theirs prolonged far beyond the honeymoon. Surrounded by every creature comfort wealth could procure or affection devise, secure in a faithful man's unaltering love, she dwelt serene, in a country where the fruits of the earth and the flowers of the forest spread natural loveliness about fields of unsurpassed fertility.

She never knew winter, want, nor war; her years were filled with peace; her estates increased to vast proportions; a thousand slaves were happy, being hers. Admired for her beauty, greatly loved, she returned an adoring husband's devotion, and bore him child-

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dren with eyes like the morning and hair like wreathed flames. Her daughters married and were fruitful, bearing children fair as an April day, with eyes like the sky of the morning. For them, for her, the world rolled on in unperturbed peace.

But she never saw her golden lad again.

Something inscrutable, deeper than whim, had come over Margot Lagoux. Her work was oddly altered: it had more air, less ease; more spell, less charm; more force, and less dexterity. The stuffs she chose no longer were notable for the exquisite, wan delicacy which so becomes the pallor of high-bred beauty; she took an incomprehensible joy in vivid color; but what was

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gained in vividness was lost in harmony. Her work retained distinction, but of a queer sort; reserve gave way to novelty; simple beauty was replaced by meretricious charm; her taste, which had been perfect, seemed suffering gradual corruption; her craft was marred by crudities. Her turbans began to look as if there were only barbaric plumes in the world, of parrakeets and cockatoos, trogons and flamingos, gay toucan wings, and extraordinary quills; florid colors and distempered stains were mingled in inharmonious contrast; mango-yellow, peacock-green, Egyptian blue, and Congo scarlet, flaunted their discordant tones together.

Style she had; but it was style *malade du rouvieux*; her trade-mark had become gaucherie, her art artifice; good taste had departed. Her work no more

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was garnished, but bedizened with excess, nowhere restrained, but having unrestricted vent in tawdry fripperies. Her handicraft was stamped by power and energy misapplied; the sole distinction it had left was whimsical device. Everything she did was like sweet wine soured, the worse for having been so much better. Her bonnets were like songs in forced falsetto, every line slurred by subtle default, every sweet note out; always too much or too little, never the happy mean. Even the pearls or marguerites, which she had formerly employed in bordures as trade-marks of her craft, had become cheap beads of colored pottery and glass. In tarnished bowls, in corners of obscure pawnshop windows, among the dead flies and the dust, are still occasionally to be found beads, often called "margots" or "mar-

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gotons," like those employed by Margot Lagoux in her practice of millinery, but said to be thread-plummets employed by makers of lace. One, a Greek dealer in old gold and stolen silver, tells the enquiring traveler that these are Dead Sea pebbles, worn to their peculiar shapes by the ceaseless fret of that gloomy sea. But beads like them, grotesques, baroques, were laced on toques and turbans of her make, and now and then were found among the laces on bonnets which had no need of them: men, seeing them, narrowed their glances, and took new note of the wearer. Those aware permitted none near or dear to adorn her person with them.

A queerly degenerated taste marked everything that Margot did. With singular obliquity she set everything

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awry; from rich goods produced unspeakably poor results; and with cheap cunning vexed priceless stuffs beyond recovery or repair.

Her custom fell from *vendre cher* to *bon marché*. With the diminishing stream of patronage the material in her shop went down from *velours ras*, *velours façonné*, and *velours de soie*, to *velours de coton* and *coton croisé*, from velvet to velveteens. The air of distinction which attracted gentility utterly faded away; the coarse, crude stuffs and rude handiwork repelled the aristocratic. Calls for her work became infrequent; more infrequent; came no more. One morning the milliner's shop was shut. It never was opened again. The stuffs on the dusty shelves grew faded, discolored, and stained; cobwebs hung from the mouldy walls;

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the trade which had known and frequented the place knew it no more.

But out of this end, like a paradox, above the apparent wreck Margot arose in prosperity: the Devil was good as his word.

She dwelt in a massive great house, a mansion, handsome, stately, and somber, by a courtyard paved in marble, approached through a vaulted tunnel lit by a dull-flaming torch and closed by an iron gate. From the side of the court a staircase of marble rose to her private door, ornate as a public office's entry and massively carved in flowers; stairs within, of blue-veined marble, went up through wide corridors heavily panelled in dark Spanish wood. Beneath the house vast cellars boomed and

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echoed; the chimneys rose like turrets grouped against the darkling sky. The house throughout was furnished with every luxury befitting persons of circumstance: broad hearths for the burning of long wood in winter, vaulted corridors, burnished fittings of latten, and jalousies of saffron-wood with retaining rosettes of porcelain; mahogany tables of rare design, deep-carved, and adorned with brass. Curtains of saffron-colored silk cinctured with gold braid hung from the ceiling to the floor in heavy golden folds. Day was made night, night day by many subterfuges, with blinds and saffron jalousies ironed fast against the noon. By night the light shone out to the red stars, and the house was full of the swift, rich sweeping of heavy silk curtains waved by the wind, and the glow of the wax candles

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chequered the courtyard below with gold. In the middle of the courtyard, at the foot of the staircase, a fountain played in a yellow basin, with a pleasant, incessant noise of whispering green water, falling perpetually with a delicate patter over seven brown stone dolphins, spouting from whose pouted mouths went up contending streams; the waters gushed, white-laced, babbling, from the green-coppered vents in the dolphins' mouths, and descended in spray to the bowl below; and under the bowl the drain-pipe murmured subterranean cool. About the courtyard stood a row of crimson-flowered pomegranate-trees: through the split brown rinds the garnet pulp and silver seeds showed, clotted thick as crystals in a stone; and purple fruits in heavy clusters, of myriad, uncounted drupes, hung

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from the superior privets ranged along the courtyard wall, dropping green shadows, like vast laces, over the blind-arched bricks below. A garden lay beyond the court, its gate hung thick and deep with yellow roses, clinging to the iron lantern, drooping and swaying in unconstrained festoons. Beyond the garden the place debouched into a forgotten graveyard.

By night alive, by day the place was sunk in dreams, with lavish beauty everywhere composed to sleep in sunlit sloth, luxurious and deep. The place seemed fallen in a trance. The pigeons dozed along the eaves; and on the grass below, where the garden stretched, the peacock slowly danced his stiff and stately dance, an iris feather bubble, green as jade, purple as wine, blue as lazuli. The courtyard seemed the very

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home of sleep. The sun lay stupid on the silent walls and drowsily beat on the blue-doored cellars shut with cautious bars, closed fast and locked beneath the arcaded porch; the shadows of the slim pillars slept in the graceful galleries. All was hushed but the peacock's cry, while that iridescent bubble, on toes black as ebony, danced, here and there, there and here, his slow "pavone" among the yellow roses.

By night beneath the windows ancient tombs bared their sculptured breasts to the stars and stared up at the golden arches; and dank, black, cracked sarcophagi, chequered with light, laid broad their time-worn, sculptured emblems and tragical inscriptions, —skulls with wings, and urns, and hour-glasses whose un-refluent, palsied sands meet measure of eternity kept

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with motionless registry, and stony garlands of stone flowers which never bloomed, nor ever were sweet, as that beneath them had been sweet to man's all quivering sense. Here lay the long dead, day and night, communicant in death; and wraiths of old unhappiness rose sighing with regret, or dreamed, beneath the stones, of love as futile as regret. The wind among the tombstones, like a stream from a windy fountain, murmured among the pomegranate-trees, stirred the shadows under the privets, rustled between the silken curtains, whispering, much as dead men do, chill, wordless, fluttering breaths of unsolved mystery. And when the wind from the graveyard whispered, all the place stood listening, hushed. The wind from the graveyard whispered among the saffron curtains; the ceaseless foun-

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tain waters fell; else all was still but the peacock's wild night-cry, sounding through the unfathomable silence like the rending of an illusion,—deep and singular and strange,—by a harsh trumpet's blast. Heh! The Devil keeps his promises in the way that suits him best.

Margot's existence here was a thing apart from everything plebeian: she was immensely wealthy; had riches such as are won by few, though sought by many, plantations in the country, houses in town, money on call in quantity that made great bankers bow; women to wait upon her, deferential men, boys to run at her beck, maid-servants, bond and free, to go before her; her cellar was famous for its wines,

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her dress for its wild and extravagant beauty; all that she touched she took; all that she took she kept; everything that she kept increased beyond the bounds of reason; she was spoken to with deference and referred to with finesse. She had her carriage, lined with silk, with yellow hammer-cloths and bands; in the license of her beauty she laughed at sumptuary laws, and in her illegal equipage rolled insolently on; in amber gown and canary turban fastened with a golden brooch, despite the law, she rode the streets like a charioted queen; or, dressed in wild, unstudied colors such as are used in Barbary, she wandered in her garden in the after-hours of the day, making wreaths of the saffron roses, a cockatoo upon her arm the color of a wild peach flower.

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A shapely, splendid creature, with her handsome, heavy hands, neck like a tower, glorious hair hanging rich beneath its turban, her embroidered robe but carelessly worn and recklessly adjusted,—oddly, the coarser the more becoming,—a goddess made of beautiful earth, but coarse as the cotton-flower, with confident face and insolent mien she took her way through the streets with a supple stride which was the despair of envious rivalry; hers was a regal beauty like the tiger's loveliness.

With her face like beauty seen in dreams, incredible and untrue, she went through the community like a lovely malady: even wise men's souls were troubled; sturdy hearts that had laughed at passion shook with the fairness of her face; piety was troubled by

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her golden loveliness. More than one sermon from Solomon's Song was inspired by Rita Lagoux; she was known as the woman with a face like a beautiful blasphemy.

Time but increased the wildness and singularity of her beauty: it was gossiped about in the market-stalls; it was babbled about in the streets.

Then a torpor fell on her loveliness, a dull and leaden look; her beauty grew sullen and lowering as the flame of a fallen fire. Though not much altered in appearance she was somehow greatly changed. Her looks had lost something, no one could say what, gained something none could define. It was not that she was less the unforgettable being she had been, or that her sullen beauty made less mark on memory, but that the ecstasy of beauty was replaced

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by a queer unrest. Though as never before she was possessed of a singular comeliness, men began to regard her with an odd uneasiness: there was a foreignness in her face, and the look of alien things.

She looked like a portrait of herself painted in irony.

On the day that her daughter was married in far-away New Orleans, Margot stood motionless by her mirror, staring at her own reflection. The day seemed oddly overcast. Suddenly she burst into wild, shrill laughter, cheerless and tragic, her body shaking, her hands wrung together, turned away with an epithet, reversed the glass, and never looked into a mirror again. Something had passed across her face like a strange, ambiguous stain.

A shadow had fallen upon her like

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an unexpected dusk, or the dimness under a passing cloud, and had overcast her beauty.

Not time with his pinching seam, nor age with its ugliness, but a subtle and more peculiar change had come over Margot Lagoux.

There is a half-light in the hour of an eclipse which casts a weird spell on the world, when the sun is but a narrow crescent at high noon and the earth grows oddly dim in an untimely dusk. Such a dusk was fallen upon Margot Lagoux.

Sultry beauty such as hers has ever an early afternoon; but this was more than sultry beauty's early afternoon. Not day, not darkness yet, but dusk went with her everywhere like twilight in the woods. The sun shone brightly everywhere along a sparkling world,

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but on Margot lay a shadow, strange and sinister. As unbleached muslin sallows to dingy isabella, as metal tarnishes from neglect, as white paper dulls in the sun, as the spot on bruised fruit turns brown, Margot Lagoux was changing; she was becoming tawny, swart, *bisblanc* as the Creoles say. Her golden-ruddy cheeks had turned a morbid olive-brown as if a somber fountain were playing in her blood.

There were many women at that day on whom fate laid dreadful hands: Louise Briaud, who was blinded by smallpox; Fanchette Bourie, whom God pitied with death; Helene Riche-
mont, the leper; Floride Biez, Doucie Baramont, Francesca Villeponteaux, wrecked by disfiguring maladies. God give them peace! But on none was laid

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so ruthless, unrelenting, deliberate a hand as fell upon Rita Lagoux.

She changed like a portrait whose shadows, painted in bitumen, have struck through and distempered the rest. Like a strange, nocturnal creature she seemed to absorb the gloom. Her glorious eyes grew jaundiced; her rose-brown lips grew dun; the delicate webs that joined her fingers grew yellow as bakers' saffron. Malice laughed at her thickening lips.

Weeks turned months, months years; swarthy she grew and ugly. She put aside beauty as a worn, bright garment, and took on grotesquery stark and medieval as a Chinese teak-wood carving. She became both grotesque and contorted, gross, misshapen, sullied and debased. The old enchantment was gone like a necromancer's spell. The

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perfect gait had faltered down to a lurching trot, a hurrying waddle with an irregular, unsure motion, hesitating a moment, then hastening on with vague uncertainty. Her soft, sleepy laugh had grown violent, her melodious voice coarse; of her fair face there was nothing left, no, not remembrance even.

A young man came to her threshold one morning and looked in eagerly; he would speak with Margot Lagoux: but "Is that Margot Lagoux?" he asked, a curious look coming over his face,—that woman, obese, with low brows, huge fat eyelids, round bare forehead, short, strained and corded neck enormously thick, yellowed teeth irregularly shown between thick, sallowed lips, cheeks wrinkled, flecked and blotched with brown like spotted peaches. "No!" he said, hastily, shrinking away. "That is

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not the woman I mean. The woman I meant was comely . . . and had a beautiful daughter named Gabrielle!" He turned away, shuddering.

She wore old rags for robes, an old *freloche* upon her head, in nowise restraining the unkempt coils of her hair hanging matted upon her neck. Her cheeks hung slack and dark and dingy; her lusterless locks were felted into a tangled web that had grown gray with lint; her frowsy chin was stained as with walnut hulls. She was falling apart like an old house with nobody living in it, swore black oaths with a foul mouth, cursed all who crossed her path, ate like a beast food fit for beasts, her fevered sun of glory set,—gone, gone, gone. Down she went, like the stuffs in her shop, from *velours ras* to *coton croisé*, down, down to oblivion, down to

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the dusty corner of death. She spat in the dirt: "*Je m'en fiche!*" she said.

She hated a priest, and never knelt at a confessional again.

She did not die in the great house where she had passed the days of her power; every place she dwelt in sank into decay, the swifter where its integrity seemed permanent and secure; nothing purged the ambiguous spell which dragged them down together to the dust. The great house stood a ruin above a ruined court, a wreck of its former pride and splendor, black and foul; the fountain had fallen long ago, its pipes strangled and eaten away to crusts of lead and thready ribs of iron in the sand. Lilac lane was gone; there was no lane there any more, and had

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been none for years; there was no trace of where it ran, its hedge-rows, or its gardens, or of Margot's cottage other than a mouldering heap of broken brick, bleak rafters of the fallen roof, and one stark, fallen gable; of Gabrielle's garden nothing remained.

Margot died in a dirty hovel in an unkempt alleyway, in the midst of a negro quarter, where, if one beat a drum or caused an instrument of an orchestra to sound, the people swarmed from the tenements like ants out of a hill. The place was fallen and foul, and filled with beggary; and that is the end of a tenement; for beggars are like distemper, the place where they have lived is hard to cure. All the houses in the alley were filthy; but none was filthy as hers.

There was a tremendous storm that

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night. Her house was ablaze with light; the little tailor who lived next door said, "Aha! Mother Go-go has company!" But the only person seen was one of the religious sort, a tall man, with a face like an unpleasant taste.

The thunder was terrific; the storm wild beyond compare. The wind blew with a sound like wild, gigantic laughter. "Ff-ff-ff!" went the gale; the gusts howled through the tailor's house; the whole place shook; the blinds banged and crashed; the wind wailed, and sucked down the chimney with a sound like awful weeping; the little tailor's soul was filled with a sense of enormous terror.

All night long the thunder rolled like the laughter of an angry god. Dislodged by the tremendous concussions the cockroaches flew out of the walls;

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and, in the morning, after the storm, the parrakeets which lived in the trees were all turned gray as ashes.

The windows and doors of Old Mother Go-go's house were standing open wide. It was plain that they had stood open all night, and that the rain had beaten into the house unopposed.

This, however, occasioned but brief surprise. When they peered in at the door the rats were playing around the floor with the beads of a broken rosary.

A priest came, hurrying in. He did not stay in long. When he came out his face was white as a sheet and his lips were drawn and gray.

Those who prepare the dead came. They stood on the threshold peeping and queerly looking in at the door.

A gray mist filled the place like a cloud, through which things were visible.

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The rooms were damp as an old vault, and full of a death-like smell; the walls were covered with green mould; the woodwork was rotten. The candles had guttered and dripped and gone out; the floor was bespattered with tallow. All around the rooms were coffers of linen and lace, "*coffres très beaux, coffres mignons, de dressouer compagnons; coffres de boys qui point n'empire; madres et jaunes comme cire.*" All the coffers were open, and everything that was in them was tossed wildly about the floor; not one piece of the lovely old stuffs, as yellow as wax, but was blackened by showers of soot and trampled under foot by the neighbor's goat, the print of whose hoofs was everywhere.

And Madame Margot?

Heh! God had designed her for tragedy; but here was comedy. Mar-

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got lay stretched out on the floor, as black as ebony; dead, among the ashes and soot, charred like a fallen star.

The coroner found that the woman had died of the visitation of God; but Doe Gou, the tailor, said simply, "Has God feet like a goat?"

The bishop refused to have masses said for the repose of her pitiful soul; and they would not allow her to be buried in St. Sebastian's graveyard. The potter's field was the place for her; her color was too peculiar.

Too black to be buried among the white, too white to lie down with the black, she was buried, in secret, in her own garden, under the magnolia-trees.

And that was the end of Madame Margot.

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